

Introduction

The *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in March 1989 was the largest and most destructive in United States history. When the spill occurred, officials in the Pentagon could find little information on previous oil spills that would help them in planning a response. As a result, Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works) Robert Page directed the Army Corps of Engineers to document its oil spill activities so that the “lessons learned” would not be lost. This history chronicles the Defense Department and Corps response to the spill and evaluates specific problems such as dredge operations, shoreline cleanup, and funding and reimbursement and the efforts to resolve these problems.

Although Exxon and the Coast Guard had responsibility for the cleanup operations and played a larger role than the Army Corps of Engineers, the Corps nonetheless made significant contributions. As part of the Department of Defense response, the Corps provided dredges, which proved to be the most effective equipment for recovering oil that had been collected on the water; advanced the ability to locate oil on the water surface and the shoreline using remote sensing; and provided officials in the White House and Pentagon with information on the scope of the problem that they could use in decision making.

In looking at the Corps’ response, certain themes become apparent. Most striking is the proactive nature and flexibility of the Corps of Engineers as an organization. The response clearly indicated the Corps’ willingness and ability to assume new missions. It also reflected the dedication and innovation of Corps personnel, particularly Alaska District staff and the dredge crews. They walked into a tense, confused situation, carved out a mission, and executed that mission successfully. The Corps proved itself to be a worthy partner in oil spill response.